

IDRC and Research Networks: Allies for Development

April 2006

Knowledge networks are helping IDRC achieve its goals. Working together, individuals and organizations worldwide are building capacity, improving the quality of research, and influencing policy. In a new survey, networks applaud IDRC's steadfast support – with satisfaction ratings at over 90 percent.

Taking stock of diversity

What do the Uganda Health Information Network, the Systemwide Initiative on Malaria and Agriculture, and the Latin American Urban Agriculture Research Network have in common?

These are among the hundreds of “knowledge networks” that, over the years, IDRC has launched, supported, and operated in order to promote applied research in developing countries.

These forums – comprising organizations or individuals, and often both – are dedicated to building relationships, sharing tasks, and working together on development issues of common interest. They advance the cross-fertilization of ideas, publicize research results, influence government policy, and broaden the capacity for doing research.

The networks that IDRC has fostered are remarkably diverse. They go by such varied labels as “team,” “consortium,” “initiative,” “community,” “partnership,” “project,” “group,” “alliance,” “joint venture,” “forum,” and of course, “network.” They link scientific, academic, and development communities, and are housed in non-governmental organizations, universities and colleges, and research centres. They tackle issues ranging from environment and natural resource management to information and communication technologies to social and economic equity.

Although IDRC has always recognized the importance of networks – and is admired by other development agencies for the depth of its experience with them – only recently has the organization begun to consolidate its corporate understanding of these structures. Now, IDRC has determined to bring to the light the tacit knowledge that it has gathered in company with its many partners. By way of a strategic evaluation, begun in 2003, IDRC aims to document and to share with other development bodies the rich practical experience it has gained in working with networks.

A sweeping survey

The analysis has tackled the full sweep of the organization's involvement with networks during 1995-2005. Its purpose is to determine how IDRC can continue to support healthy, active, and effective networks.

At earlier stages of the exercise, the evaluation team carried out a review of IDRC's documentation, which led to papers on topics such as the purpose, coordination, and sustainability of networks. The team also interviewed key informants, and hosted a stimulating learning forum.

This survey stage, conducted by the Canadian firm Decima Research, comprised a detailed questionnaire in English, French, and Spanish addressed to network members and coordinators. Its findings have helped develop profile descriptions of these investigators and of their networks, measure the effectiveness of IDRC's support for them, and gauge the impact of these networks on individual careers, member organizations, research quality, and society at large.

The original survey sample included all networks supported by IDRC during the decade 1995-2005. In total, 183 (78%) coordinators started the survey, and 110 (51%) completed the questionnaire, by telephone or by email. The 110 coordinators represent 80 different networks. The margin of error for the sample was plus or minus 7.5% at a 95% confidence interval. Thirty-three IDRC network members also completed the survey, translating into a margin of error of plus or minus 17.3% at a 95% confidence interval.

In other words, this evaluation has provided the most comprehensive and reliable review of IDRC-supported networks ever attempted. The survey achieved broad representation among program areas, world regions and the age of the networks, and the data collection techniques ensured that every potential respondent had a full chance to take part in the exercise. Because of the number and scope of the participants, the researchers are confident about the statistical significance of their findings. They believe that their study makes an important contribution to the understanding and use of knowledge networks – new learning that will be of particular interest to other development agencies, academics, and networks themselves.

Networks: a profile

In terms of their topic of interest, the networks surveyed are spread more or less evenly among IDRC's main program areas: natural resources, social policy, economic policy, and information, communications and technology. Just under one-fifth have a single subject focus and a single geographic focus (for example, the Digital Review of Asia Pacific). Overall, however, networks concentrate on a wide range of world regions, and fully one-third have a global concern.

Half the networks surveyed are five years old or younger, and perhaps contrary to expectation, the institutional "homes" of all networks have been relatively stable. Almost three-quarters have never moved during their existence. The most frequently reported type of base is an NGO or a civil society organization. Of the networks sampled, only 15 percent are located in Canada.

Most networks have a closed membership policy, meaning that individuals are selected rather than being able to join without criteria. And most are open to both individuals and organizations as opposed to one or the other exclusively.

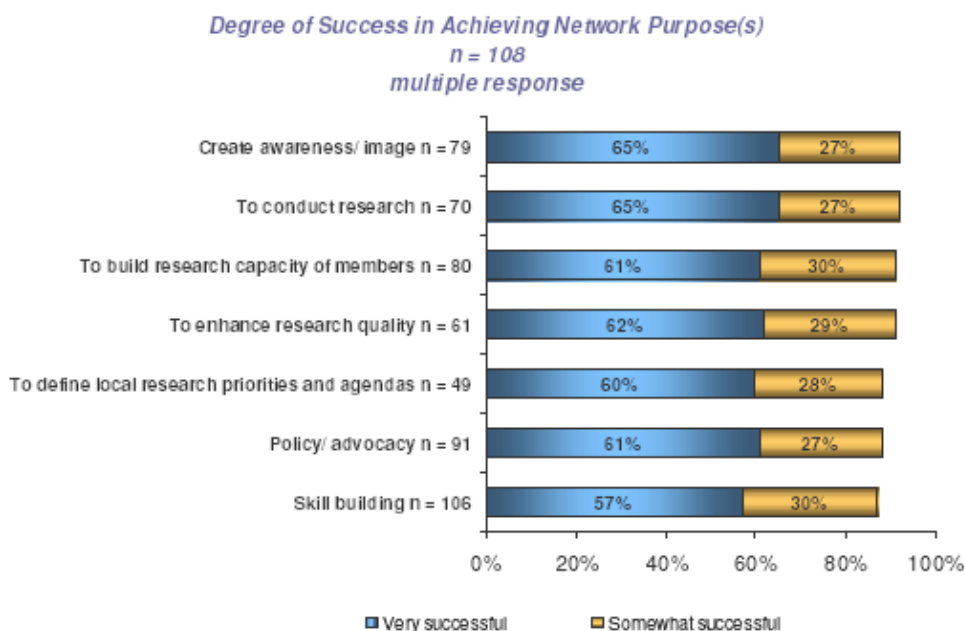
The average number of individual members in a network is 247; the average number of organizational members is 39. Overall, three-quarters of individuals and three-quarters of organizations come from developing countries. Networks tend to grow – the majority saw their membership increase over time, with very few reporting a decline.

Many networks report having multiple objectives; in fact, most declare four or more purposes, the most frequently mentioned being “skill-building” and “public advocacy”. Broadly speaking, networks fall along these very lines into two general types:

* Skill-building networks (Decima calls them “research networks”) focus on enhancing practical expertise and the ability of researchers to carry out investigations. Although the groups tend to be smaller, they comprise a higher proportion of individual members, and report more individual capacity building than others. They are more stable in their resolve, and take a longer-term approach to change.

* Public advocacy networks (Decima’s “civil society networks”) have a wider purpose, being focused on expanding the minds of policy-makers and on influencing the direction of government decision-making. These networks have a larger number and a greater variety of members, and so must be flexible and responsive to diverse internal pressures.

One notable finding of the survey is that, whatever the category and whatever the objectives, 86% of networks claim to have been very or somewhat successful at achieving their goals. 10% said it was too early to evaluate their success and only 3% said they had not been very successful.



Network leaders: some surprises

In this area, much of what the survey uncovered was expected. Network coordinators, for example, are highly educated, most having either a doctorate or a master's degree. About half are social scientists. Generally they work in universities or colleges, or in NGOs.

Some of the results, however, were surprising. For instance, coordinators tend to be older. Only one-fifth are under the age of 40, and these younger people are likely to be professional staff rather than managers. Furthermore, IDRC supported networks appear to channel women into positions of leadership. Six out of ten network coordinators are women. Two-thirds of those with a PhD are women, and more than three-quarters of those who work in a college or university are women.

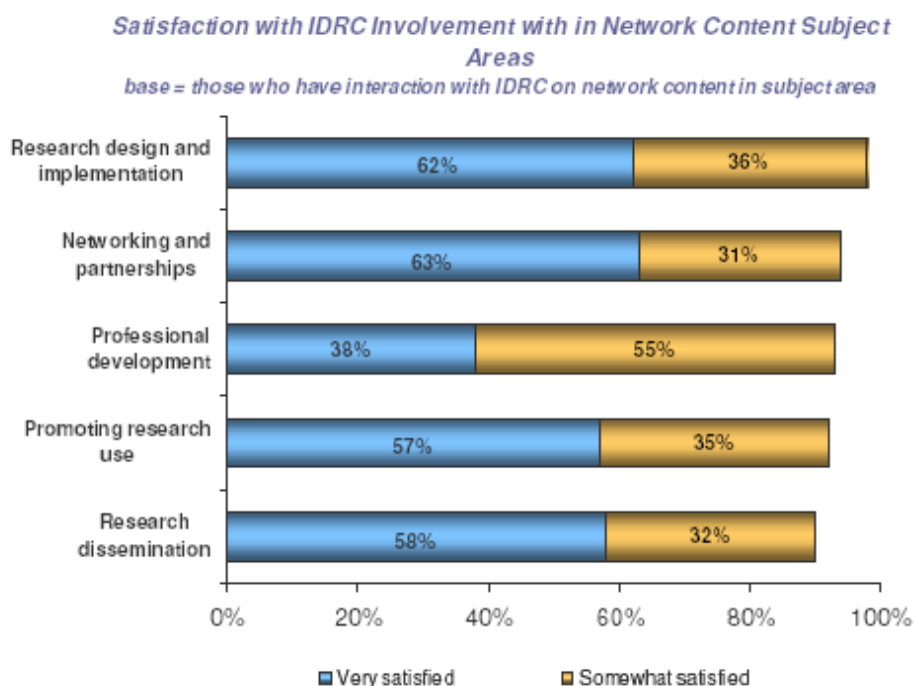
The chance that any coordinator will get a salary varies radically, depending on the kind of institution where she or he is based. Among those linked with a college or university, nearly four-fifths are volunteers – but three-quarters of those who work with NGOs are paid. Just over half the networks in the study are managed by some sort of shared coordination arrangement.

The IDRC connection: strong steady support

Almost all the networks studied have been linked with IDRC since they were founded. That is to say, IDRC has been a significant partner during the entire life-span of these bodies (half of which, as noted, are more than five years old).

Furthermore, while IDRC's main function is that of donor, the organization is "very involved" in over two-thirds of these networks in ways that go beyond the funding role. Usually, IDRC's project managers are themselves also researchers. This means that, IDRC acts also as a formal advisor offering technical assistance, sometimes as a network member or even coordinator, and occasionally as the legal base for startup networks. IDRC's close and enduring association with networks is identified as an important factor in their success, particularly in building capacity and in influencing public policy.

Fully 90 percent of networks report being satisfied with IDRC's general administration and management, and with its help in substantive areas like research dissemination and network content. If networks feel that anything can be done to improve IDRC's performance, it is "more communication," "more funding," and "more information sharing" – in other words, more of what they are already getting from IDRC.



Networking and professionalism

IDRC's direct partners are those researchers and organizations that receive its funding. IDRC is keenly interested in the effects of its collaboration on them. The study looked at the impact of network involvement on the development of these organizations and on the professional careers of their coordinators.

The survey found that almost all coordinators and organizations are satisfied to be connected with the IDRC-supported networks, mainly because the link increased their skills.

Membership helped individuals become more proficient in coordination, facilitation, and leadership; administration and financial management; writing, communication, and new languages; personal relations; computer and technical skills; project monitoring and evaluation; and – not least – conducting research.

Membership helped organizations improve their capacity for carrying out research but also their capacity for networking and partnership, communications and dissemination, administration and management – and it boosted their reputations.

Membership also kept people better informed about developments in their field. Often cited were attributes such as a network's "convening capacity" or "visibility."

In terms of the core interest of enhancing the quality of research performed, more than four-fifths of networks felt that they did so, chiefly by way of introducing improvements in methodology, but also on account of better communication tools, peer review, and the opportunity for publication.

The enrichment of these many skills fostered a professional culture well equipped to help contribute to the desired development aims.

Shaping policy

Often, IDRC's ultimate goal is to influence public policy. In this regard the survey's findings are encouraging.

Almost half the networks polled felt they had expanded the capacity of researchers to carry out investigations that are relevant to policy. Higher success rates were reported by those networks where IDRC has been very involved and by those that focus on economic issues.

Meanwhile, two-thirds of the networks felt they had helped broaden the perspective of government policy-makers and increase the knowledge available to them. Coordinators working for an international organization or for an NGO were the ones most likely to report progress on this kind of important groundwork.

Finally, almost half the networks stated that they actually have affected policy, programs, laws, legislation, and regulation. Among the characteristics of particularly effective networks – those that say they have had “great influence” – are a focus on economic policy, a single geographic interest (especially if Southeast Asia), a large number of individual and organizational members, a closed membership structure, and an active communications system.

Success of Network in Influencing Policy

